

# Aylesbury Grammar School

## Inspection report

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|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Unique Reference Number | 110511              |
| Local Authority         | Buckinghamshire     |
| Inspection number       | 325162              |
| Inspection dates        | 11–12 February 2009 |
| Reporting inspector     | Maria Dawes HMI     |

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Type of school                     | Grammar (selective)                  |
| School category                    | Foundation                           |
| Age range of pupils                | 11–18                                |
| Gender of pupils                   | Boys                                 |
| Number on roll                     |                                      |
| School (total)                     | 1272                                 |
| Sixth Form                         | 369                                  |
| Appropriate authority              | The governing body                   |
| Chair                              | Mr Kevin Hardern                     |
| Headteacher                        | Mr Stephen Lehec                     |
| Date of previous school inspection | 26–27 April 2006                     |
| School address                     | Walton Road<br>Aylesbury<br>HP21 7RP |
| Telephone number                   | 01296 484545                         |
| Fax number                         | 01296 426502                         |
| Email address                      | office@ags.bucks.sch.uk              |

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## Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors. The inspectors visited 30 lessons, two assemblies and rehearsals for a music concert, and held meetings with governors, staff, groups of students, and parents. They observed the school's work, and looked at documents including 264 parental and 360 student questionnaires.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- students' progress during Key Stage 4, and in particular their progress in English
- the extent to which the school meets the needs of all groups of students
- the impact of the new tracking system on achievement
- the effectiveness of leadership and management in securing improvement in provision and their capacity to sustain these improvements.

## Information about the school

Aylesbury Grammar school is a selective school which draws students from a wide geographical area with approximately 60 feeder schools. A new headteacher was appointed in September 2008, along with many new members of the school senior leadership team. Several of these were internal appointments.

The majority of students are from White British heritage with about 15% from ethnic minority heritages. The proportion of students with identified learning difficulties and/or disabilities is very low. About 25 students join the sixth form in Year 12 from other schools every year.

The school changed specialist designation in 2007 from Technology to Science. In addition it gained additional specialisms in Languages and in Maths & Computing. It has received many awards including Investors in People Status, Artsmark, Healthy School, Sportsmark and International School (Intermediate).

## Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

2

## Main findings

Aylesbury Grammar school is an outstanding school that not only allows students to reach exceptionally high academic standards, but to develop into confident, articulate, caring and mature young adults. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school and hold it in high esteem. These comments were typical of a great number received by the inspection team from parents: 'Our sons have always received an excellent all-round education, together with wonderful support for sport, music and other activities.' 'Absolutely delighted with AGS!'

A key factor in the school's success is the respect that all members of the community show to each other. Staff know the students exceptionally well and put them at the forefront of all their work. This results in a cohesive, purposeful and happy community where students enjoy working and learning. Good teaching overall ensures that all groups of students are making good progress. However, teaching has the potential to be even better if teachers consistently ensure that all students are challenged and supported to the highest degree. Not all teaching helps students to develop a greater independence in their learning.

The school's three specialisms are integral to the school, leading academic attainment, curriculum expansion, increased participation in languages and science, and cross-curricular working. The specialist school status reaches out into the local community and educational establishments, and is highly responsive to their needs, promoting community cohesion.

Since the last inspection, the school has made good progress in tackling the key areas for development. In particular, the partnership between parents and carers and the school is now very strong. However, the school was initially slow in developing the use of assessment data to monitor and improve students' progress. The systems are now in place, particularly in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form, and the routine use of the data is beginning to be more embedded. This is yet to have a full impact on students' progress. Although in post a relatively short period of time, the headteacher, supported by the able and dedicated senior leadership team and middle leaders, has achieved much. The correct priorities for improvement have been identified, and the school is driving forward these priorities at a rapid pace. This, combined with the school's track record of high academic and personal outcomes, demonstrates the school's good capacity to improve. However, clear short-term and longer-term milestone success criteria, which would enable progress over time to be

judged, have yet to be incorporated in school improvement planning.

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further develop teaching to ensure that a greater proportion of students make exceptional progress in their learning by consistently:
  - developing learning styles which actively involve students in their learning through individual and group work
  - ensuring that teaching supports and challenges all students
  - checking the understanding of all students in lessons, and ensuring that they are all clear about how to improve
  - using whole-school assessment strategies to improve achievement over time.
- Refine school improvement planning by ensuring that specific, measurable success criteria are identified by which the school can regularly judge the impact of its actions.

## How good is the overall outcome for individuals and groups of pupils?

|   |
|---|
| 1 |
|---|

Students' achievement is outstanding. They arrive in school with very high prior attainment and, due to effective teaching and their engagement and enthusiasm, the majority make good progress. Students are keen to answer questions, participate in activities and enjoy being challenged. In some lessons, however, the level of learning for a minority of students drops because activities and resources are not sufficiently adapted to students' different levels of ability. By the time they reach the end of each key stage they attain standards that are consistently high. Virtually all students leave with five or more GCSE grades A\* to C and three quarters achieve five or more top A and A\* grades. These results, though, mask some variation between subjects. For example, achievement in the specialist school subjects is particularly high. However, in recent years students' progress in English over Years 7 to 11 has been slower than in mathematics and science, and a significantly smaller proportion of students achieve the highest grades in English language than might be expected. The school has identified that the underlying reason for this is an inequality in time allocated to subjects at Key Stage 4, leading to English having insufficient curriculum time; it has plans in place to address this. Staff know students very well, providing good academic support and guidance, and as a result all groups, including vulnerable students, make equally good progress.

The attitudes and behaviour of students are excellent because of the mutual respect between students and members of staff. Relationships throughout the school community are mature and harmonious. Students enthusiastically take part in a very wide range of House events that successfully encourage them to work in teams across age groups. This was evident during the inspection particularly through the rehearsals for the house music competition, where older students worked cooperatively with, and were supported by, younger students to produce very high-

quality performances. Students say they feel safe and well cared for, and are confident that issues such as rare cases of bullying are addressed promptly and sensitively. They have strong moral values and a good understanding of other cultures. Students undertake numerous responsibilities around the school and are excellent role models for each other. Through their fundraising efforts, significant sums of money are raised for charities. Senior leaders have been explicit in promoting equal opportunities and ensuring that links are made with members of other communities.

*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>   | 1 |
| The quality of pupils' learning and their progress  | 2 |
| The quality of learning for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress            | 2 |
| How well do pupils achieve and enjoy their learning?  | 1 |
| To what extent do pupils feel safe?   | 1 |
| How well do pupils behave?  | 1 |
| To what extent do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?  | 1 |
| To what extent do pupils contribute to the school and wider community?  | 1 |
| Pupils' attendance  | 2 |
| How well do pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being? | 1 |
| What is the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?                                | 1 |

## The quality of the school's work

Most teaching is effective in enabling students to learn well. Highly knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers are successful in creating a classroom environment where students enjoy learning and are eager to achieve. All teachers have very high expectations of their students. Lessons are well structured and move forward with good pace, and students demonstrate a confident approach to their work. The school is aware, however, that more opportunities should be provided for students to develop independent and collaborative learning skills in lessons. Teachers know their students very well and use this information to inform their planning. Outstanding lessons, such as seen in music and languages, are typified by the way teachers plan different activities for different groups and individuals according to whether they need either more challenging or more supportive work. This enables all groups and individuals to make maximum progress. However, in other classes observed, teaching did not always take into account the needs of individuals so well and all students were given the same work to complete, thus limiting the progress of some. A strength of teaching is the way that questioning is skilfully used to probe and develop students' understanding of the topic being taught. In several lessons, teachers employ a variety of techniques such as using mini-whiteboards, students

<sup>1</sup> Grades for attainment are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; 4 is low

assessing each others' work, and presentations to find out how much all students were learning. As a result, teachers are able to focus support or speed learning up. However, this is not consistent and in a few cases observed, the learning of less-confident, struggling, or quieter students is not checked carefully enough, and students are not then given clear feedback about how to improve.

The school has relatively recently introduced new systems to monitor students' achievement and analyse how this can be improved. Teachers now have a clearer understanding of students' progress and are using this to set challenging targets both for groups and individual students. Students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form speak confidently about how well they are doing, what grades or levels they are working at or hoping to reach, and how to get there. However younger students are much less secure, partly because some changes to the assessment system have not yet been implemented at Key Stage 3.

Since the last inspection, the school has broadened the curriculum to ensure it more effectively meets the differing needs and aspirations of all groups of students. The wide range of choices at both Key Stages 4 and 5, and the extensive range of extra-curricular activities, all serve to enhance students learning. Increased personalisation of the timetable enables some students to fast-track GCSE examinations in subjects such as French, and others to take additional options such as additional mathematics alongside GCSE mathematics, with good results.

Outstanding care and support contribute highly to the success of the school. Staff know students very well, and the recent introduction of formal monitoring of students' personal development is excellent. Vulnerable students are identified, and support tailored to their needs, in collaboration – where necessary – with a range of outside support agencies.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

|  |   |
|--|---|
| High quality teaching and purposeful learning  | 2 |
| Effective assessment   | 2 |
| An appropriate curriculum which meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, provision through partnership with other organisations | 1 |
| Support, guidance and care   | 1 |

## How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher, with the highly effective support of the senior leadership team, has successfully engendered a shared vision among staff. There is a clear focus on improving provision, and in particular teaching and learning, while retaining the best from the school's successful history and tradition. Staff feel valued and supported, and many commented on how much they appreciated the opportunities to be consulted. Morale is very high.

The school has a very good understanding of how well it is doing, and the recently improved tracking and high-quality monitoring of student outcomes have enabled

them to find out how well individuals and groups of students are doing. There is thus no difference in the outcomes between different groups. The school has successfully engendered a cohesive community, where all members show respect and tolerance for others. In addition there is a highly effective strategy in place for engaging with communities outside the school, particularly through the work of the specialist subjects, work with Aylesbury Youth Action, and International School status.

The senior leadership team has correctly identified the key areas for improvement and has put in place many appropriate actions to bring about further improvements. However, development plans do not always show rigorous success criteria or interim reviews by which senior leaders and governors will judge the success of their actions. Governors are enthusiastic and committed, supporting the senior leadership and regularly monitoring and providing challenge. They are keen to take a greater role in a wider range of monitoring activities, such as observing teaching and learning. Procedures to ensure that students are safe are robust.

Since the last inspection, relationships and communications with parents have improved significantly. The school has introduced a wide range of systems for communicating with parents and seeking their opinions. Parents who were talked to during the inspection, and those that replied to the parental questionnaire, were overwhelmingly positive about the school and keen to impress that this was an area that had considerably improved. One parent even commented on the dedication of a teacher who rang her at home to discuss a programme of work to enable her son to achieve grade As in his GCSEs.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Communicating ambition and driving improvement  | 1 |
| Promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination   | 1 |
| Ensuring that safeguarding procedures are effective   | 1 |
| Ensuring that the governing body provides effective challenge and support so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities are met    | 2 |
| Promoting the school's relationship with parents and carers, including their involvement in decision-making about matters relating to learning and well-being | 1 |
| Developing partnerships with other providers, organisations and services  | 1 |
| Ensuring the school contributes to community cohesion   | 1 |
| Deploying resources to achieve value for money  | 1 |

## Sixth form

Sixth-form students are excellent role models for the rest of the school. The overwhelming majority of Year 11 students stay on in the sixth form, where they are joined by students from other schools. Students make excellent progress and achieve examination results that are well above those found nationally. The proportion of students completing their courses and continuing from Year 12 to Year 13 is exceptionally high. Almost all students go on to higher education, including Oxford



and Cambridge Universities.

The outstanding care and support enjoyed by students in the main school continue into the sixth form. Students who join the sixth form in Year 12 integrate easily. Students especially appreciate the ready help and guidance that they receive from teachers, who inspire confidence through their expert subject knowledge. As a result, learning is enthusiastic and sharply focused. However, the development of their independence in learning shares the same inconsistency as in the main school, and some lessons are overly directed by teachers.

Students benefit from an excellent curriculum that affords them much choice of subject and an exemplary range of enrichment opportunities including clubs, competitions, conferences and visits. The leadership of the sixth form is excellent, and students' contribution to community cohesion both within the school and beyond is exemplary, with students actively involved in the life of the school and in a wide range of community service projects, including active work with a school in Malawi.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Outcomes for students in the sixth form     | 1 |
| The quality of provision in the sixth form  | 1 |
| Leadership and management of the sixth form | 1 |
| The overall effectiveness of the sixth form | 1 |

## Views of parents and carers

The parents of over one quarter of students responded to the Ofsted questionnaire. Their responses are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school. Just a very few did not agree that the school helped them to support their child.

## What inspection judgements mean

| Grade   | Judgement    | Description   |
|---------|--------------|---|
| Grade 1 | Outstanding  | These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.  |
| Grade 2 | Good         | These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.   |
| Grade 3 | Satisfactory | These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.   |
| Grade 4 | Inadequate   | These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate. |

## Common terminology used by inspectors

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Attainment:                | the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.  |
| Progress:                  | the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.   |
| Achievement:               | an overall measure of the pupils' success in their academic learning. The term combines attainment and progress. Pupils might make good progress, for example, but if their attainment remains low, inspectors may judge that their achievement is only satisfactory. |
| Capacity to improve:       | the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.  |
| Leadership and management: | the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.  |

2 March 2009

Dear Students



Inspection of Aylesbury Grammar School, Aylesbury, HP21 7RP

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you very much for the warm welcome you gave us. We valued the discussions we had with you, both in small groups and informally around the school. We hope that you take the time to look at the full report, but we thought you would like a summary of our findings.

Many of you told us how proud you were of the school. You are right in this view, and your school is outstanding. There are many reasons for this but in particular I would like to highlight the following:

- you enjoy school and develop into confident young people prepared for the next stage of your life
- you make good progress and attain exceptionally high results
- your behaviour is outstanding, and relationships between you and your teachers are excellent
- there is a wide range of experiences on offer to you, both inside and outside the classroom, and a large proportion of you take advantage of these
- the teaching is good, and the staff work really hard to support and guide all of you, and especially those who have particular difficulties at any time
- the sixth form is vibrant and highly successful.

Your school is ambitious to continue to provide this high-quality education for you and to make it even better. We have asked your teachers to ensure that they set work that is always well matched to your ability. In addition, we would like teachers to help you become more responsible for your own learning. We could see that you are well able to rise to these challenges.

Finally, we have asked that leaders of school, at all levels, should set ambitious, measurable targets and monitor the school's progress towards them, in order to make your outstanding school even better.

You have a school to be proud of, and I am sure you will continue to support staff in making any changes. I am sure that your House Music Concert was a huge success. We wish you and the school every success in the future.

Yours faithfully

Maria Dawes  
Her Majesty's Inspector

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